

五星豪门
FIVE STAR
BILLIONAIRE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Harmony Silk Factory

Map of the Invisible World

TASH AW

五星豪门

Five Star Billionaire

A Novel

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For Aw Tee Min and Yap Chee Chun

*Suppose one can live without outside pressure, suppose one can create
one's own inner tension – then it is not true that there is nothing in man.*

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ, *The Captive Mind*

Foreword:
How to be a Billionaire

Some time ago – I forget exactly when – I decided that I would one day be very rich. By this I mean not just comfortably well off but superabundantly, incalculably wealthy, the way only children imagine wealth to be. Indeed, nowadays, whenever I am pressed to pinpoint the time in my life when these notions of great fortune formed in my head, I always answer that it must have been sometime in my adolescence, when I was conscious of the price of life's treasures but not yet fully aware of their many limitations, for there has always been something inherently childlike in my pursuit of money – that much I admit.

When I was growing up in rural Malaysia, one of my favourite TV programmes was a drama series set in a legal practice somewhere in America. All the details – the actors, the plots, the setting – are lost to me now, blurred not just by the passage of time but by a haze of bad subtitles and interrupted transmissions (the power generator and the aerial took it in turns to malfunction with crushing predictability, though in those days it seemed perfectly normal). I am not certain I could tell you what happened in a single episode of that soap opera, and besides, I did not care for the artificial little conflicts that took place all the time, the emotional ups and downs, men and women crying because they were falling in love, or out of love; the arguing, making up, making love, etc. I had a sensation that they were wasting time, that their days and

nights could have been spent more profitably; I think I probably felt some degree of frustration at this. But even these are fleeting impressions, and the only thing I really remember is the opening sequence, a sweeping panorama of metal-and-glass skyscrapers glinting in the sun, people in sharp suits carrying briefcases as they vanished into revolving doors, the endless rush of traffic on sunlit freeways. And every time I sat down in front of the TV I would think: One day, I will own a building like that, a whole tower block filled with industrious, clever people working to make their fantasies come true.

All I cared for were these introductory images; the show that followed was of secondary importance to me.

So much wasted time.

Now, when I look back at those childhood fantasies, I chuckle with embarrassment, for I realise that I was foolish: I should never have been so modest in my ambitions, nor waited so long to pursue them.

It is said that the legendary tycoon Cecil Lim Kee Huat – still *compos mentis* today at 101 – made his first profit at the age of eight, selling watermelons off a cart on the old coast road to Port Dickson. At thirteen he was running a coffee stand in Seremban, and at fifteen, salvaging and redistributing automobile spare parts on a semi-industrial scale, a recycling genius long before the concept was even invented. Small-town Malaya in the 1920s was not a place for dreams. He was eighteen and working as an occasional porter in the Colony Club when he had the good fortune to meet a young Assistant District Officer from Fife called MacKinnon, only recently arrived in the Malay States. History does not record the precise nature of their relationship (those ugly rumours of blackmail were never proved); and in any event, as we will see later, imagining the whys and wherefores of past events, the what-might-have-beens – all that is pointless. The only thing worth considering is what actually happens, and what happened in Lim's case was that he was left with enough money upon MacKinnon's untimely death (in a drowning accident) to start the

first local insurance business in Singapore, a small enterprise that would eventually become the Overseas Chinese Assurance Company, for so long a bedrock of the Malaysian and Singaporean commercial landscape until its recent collapse. We can learn much from people like Lim, but his case study would involve a separate book altogether. For now, it is sufficient to ask: What were you doing when you were eight, thirteen, fifteen, and eighteen? The answer is, I suspect: Not very much.

In the business of life, every tiny episode is a test, every human encounter a lesson. Look and learn. One day you might achieve all that I have. But time is sprinting past you, faster than you think. You're already playing catch-up, even as you read this.

Fortunately, you do get a second chance. My advice to you is: Take it. A third rarely comes your way.

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Move to Where
the Money Is

There was a boy at the counter waiting for his coffee, nodding to the music. Phoebe had noticed him as soon as he walked through the door, his walk so confident, soft yet bouncy. He must have grown up walking on carpet. He ordered two lattes and a green tea muffin and paid with a silver ICBC card that he slipped out of a wallet covered in grey-and-black chessboard squares. He was only a couple of years younger than Phoebe, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three, but already he had a nice car, a silver-blue hatchback she had seen earlier when she was crossing the street and he nearly ran her over. It was strange how Phoebe noticed such things nowadays, as swift and easy as breathing. She wondered when she had picked up the habit. She had not always been like this.

Outside, the branches of the plane trees strained the bright mid-autumn sunlight, their shadows casting a pretty pattern on the pavement. There was a light wind, too, that made the leaves dance.

‘You like this music, huh?’ Phoebe asked as she reached across him for some sachets of sugar.

His coffees arrived. ‘It’s bossa nova,’ he said, as if it was an explanation, only she didn’t understand it.

‘*Ei*, I also like Spanish music!’

‘Huh?’ he muttered as he balanced his tray. ‘It’s Brazilian.’ He didn’t even look at her, though she was glad he didn’t, because if he had, it would have been a you-are-nothing look, the kind of

quick glance she had become used to since arriving in Shanghai, people from high up looking down on her.

Brazil and Spain were nearly the same, anyway.

They were in a Western-style coffee bar just off Huaihai Lu; the streets were busy, it was a Saturday. But the week no longer divided neatly into weekend and weekday for Phoebe; it had ceased to do so ever since she arrived in Shanghai a few weeks prior to this. Every day tumbled into the next without meaning, as they had done for too long now. She didn't even know what she was doing in this part of town; she couldn't afford anything in the shops and her Italian coffee cost more than the shirt she was wearing. It was a big mistake to have come here. Her plan was so stupid; what did she think she would accomplish? Maybe she would have to reconsider everything.

Phoebe Chen Aiping, why are you so afraid all the time? Do not be afraid! Failure is not acceptable! You must raise yourself up and raise up your entire family.

She had started keeping a diary. Every day she would write down her darkest fears and craziest ambitions. It was a technique she'd learnt from a self-help master one day in Guangzhou as she waited in a noodle shop, killing time just after she had been to the Human Resources Market. A small TV had been set on top of the glass counter next to jars of White Rabbit sweets, but at first she did not pay attention, she thought it was just the news. Then she realised that it was a DVD of an inspirational life-teacher, a woman who talked about how she had turned her life around and now wanted to show the rest of us how we too could transform our lowly, invisible existence into a life of eternal happiness and success. Phoebe liked the way the woman looked straight at her, holding her gaze so steadily that Phoebe felt embarrassed, shamed by her own failure, the complete lack of even the tiniest achievement in her life. The woman had shimmering lacquered hair that was classy but not old-fashioned. She showed how a mature woman can look

beautiful and successful even when no longer in her first spring-time, as she put it herself, laughing. She had so many wise things to say, so many clever sayings and details on how to be successful. If only Phoebe had had a pen and paper she would have written down every single one, because now she cannot remember much except the feeling of courage the woman had given her, words about not being afraid of being on one's own, far from home. It was as if she had looked into Phoebe's head and listened to all the anxieties that were spinning around inside, as if she had been next to Phoebe as she lay awake at night wondering how she was going to face the next day. Phoebe felt a release, as if someone had lifted a great mountain of rocks from her shoulders, as if someone had said, You are not alone, I understand your troubles, I understand your loneliness, I am also like you. And Phoebe thought, The moment I have some money, the first thing I am going to buy is your book. I will not even buy an LV handbag or a new HTC smartphone, I am going to buy your words of wisdom and study them the way some people study the Bible.

The book was called *Secrets of a Five Star Billionaire*. This is something Phoebe would never forget.

One tip that did stick in her mind was the diary, which the woman did not call a diary but a Journal of Your Secret Self, in which you would write down all your black terrors, everything that made you fearful and weak, alongside everything you dream of. You must have more positive dreams than burdensome fears. Once you write something in this book it cannot harm you any more because the fears are conquered by the dreams on the opposite page. So when you are successful you can read this journal one last time before you discard it forever, and you will smile to see how afraid and underdeveloped you were, because you will have come so far. Then you will throw this book away into the Huangpu River and your past self will disappear, leaving only the glorious reborn product of your dreams.

She started the journal six months ago, but still her dreams had not cancelled out her fears. It would happen soon. It had to.

I must not let this city crush me down.

Phoebe looked around the café. The chairs were mustard-yellow and grey, the walls unpainted concrete, as if the work had not yet been finished, but she knew that it was meant to look like this, it was considered fashionable. On the terrace outside there were foreigners sitting with their faces tilted towards the sun – they did not mind their skin turning to leather. Someone got up to leave and suddenly there was a table free next to the Brazilian-music lover. He was with a girl. Maybe it was his sister and not a girlfriend.

Phoebe sat down next to them and turned her body away slightly to show she was not interested in what they were doing. But in the reflection in the window – the sun was shining brightly that day, it was almost Mid-Autumn Festival and the weather was crisp, golden, perfect for dreaming – she could see them quite clearly. The girl was bathed in crystal light as if on a stage, and the boy was cut in half by a slanting line of darkness. Every time he leant forward he came into the light. His skin was like candlewax.

As the girl bent over her magazine, Phoebe could see that she was definitely a girlfriend, not a sister. Her hair fell over her face, so Phoebe could not tell if she was pretty, but she sat the way a pretty person would. Her dress was a big black shirt with loads of words printed all over it like graffiti, meaningless sentences such as PEACE\$\$\$€♥♥PARIS, and honestly it was horrible and made her body look formless as a ghost, but it was expensive, anyone could see that. The handbag on the floor was made of leather so soft it seemed to melt into the ground. It spread out at the girl's feet like an exotic pet, and Phoebe wanted to stroke its cross-hatch pattern to see what it felt like. The boy leant forward and in the mirrored reflection he caught Phoebe's eye. He said something to his girlfriend in Shanghainese which Phoebe couldn't understand, and the girl looked up at Phoebe with a sideways glance. It was something Shanghainese girls had perfected, this method of looking at you side-on without turning their faces to you. It meant that they could show off their fine cheekbones and appear uninterested at

the same time, and it made you feel that you were not important at all to them, not worthy even of a proper stare.

Phoebe looked away at once. Her cheeks felt hot.

Do not let other people step on you.

Sometimes Shanghai weighed down on her with the weight of ten skyscrapers. The people were so haughty, their dialect so harsh to her ears. If someone talked to her in their language she would feel attacked just by the sound of it. She had come here full of hope, but on some nights, even after she had deposited all her loathing and terror into her secret journal, she still felt that she was tumbling down, down, and there was no way up. It had been a mistake to gamble as she did.



She was not from any part of China, but from a country thousands of miles to the south, and in that country she had grown up in a small town in the far north-east. It is a region that is poor and remote, so she is used to people thinking of her as inferior, even in her own country. In her small town the way of life had not changed very much for fifty years, and would probably never change. Visitors from the capital city used to call it charming, but they didn't have to live there. It was not a place for dreams and ambition, and so Phoebe did not dream. She did what all the other young boys and girls did when they left school at sixteen: they travelled across the mountain range that cut the country in two to find work on the west coast, moving slowly southward until they reached the capital city.

Here are some of the jobs her friends took in the year they left home. Trainee waiter. Assistant fake-watch stall-holder. Karaoke hostess. Assembly-line worker in a semiconductor factory. Bar girl. Shampoo girl. Water-cooler delivery man. Seafood-restaurant cleaner. (Phoebe's first job was among those listed above, but she

would rather not say which one.) Five years in these kinds of jobs, they passed so slowly.

Then she had some luck. There had been a girl who'd disappeared. Everyone thought she was in trouble – she'd been hanging out with a gangster, the kind of big-city boy you couldn't tell your small-town parents about, and everyone thought it wouldn't be long before she was into drugs or prostitution; they were sure of it because she had turned up one day with a big jade bracelet and a black eye. But from nowhere Phoebe received an email from this girl. She wasn't in trouble, she was in China. She'd just decided that enough was enough, and left one morning without telling her boyfriend. She'd saved enough money to go to Hong Kong, where she'd been a karaoke hostess for a while – she was not ashamed to say it because everyone does it, but it was not for long – and now she was working in Shenzhen. She was a restaurant manager, a classy international place, not some dump, you know, and she was in charge of a staff of sixteen. She even had her own apartment (photo attached – small but bright and modern with a vase of plastic roses on a glass table). Thing is, she'd met a businessman from Beijing who was going to marry her and take her up north, and she wanted to make sure everything was OK at the restaurant before she left. They always needed good waiting staff at New World Restaurant. Just come! Don't worry about visas. We can fix that. There were two smiley faces and a winky one at the end of the email.

Those days were so exciting, when they emailed each other several times a day. What clothes shall I bring? What is the winter weather like? What kind of shoes do I need for my uniform? Each email that arrived from China made Phoebe feel that she was one step closer to lifting herself up in the world and becoming someone successful. It made the hair salon where she was working at the time seem so small – the clients were *small* people who did not realise how *small* they were. When they said to her, Hey, Phoebe, you are not concentrating, she just laughed inside because she knew that very soon she would be the one giving them orders and

leaving them tips. She was going to experience adventures and see things that none of them could even dream about.

It took her a few weeks to get enough money together for the ticket to Hong Kong plus a bit extra to get her to Shenzhen, but from then on it would be plain sailing, because she had a job lined up and she would stay with her friend for the first couple of months until she found her own place. She didn't need all that much money, she would start making plenty once she got there, her friend assured her. From then on anything was possible. She could start her own business doing whatever she wanted – some former waitresses at the restaurant were already going around in chauffeur-driven cars just a year after they quit their jobs. New China was amazing, she would see for herself. No one asks too many questions, no one cares where you are from. All that counts is your ability. If you can do a job, you're hired.

People say that it is hard to leave their lives behind, and that when the time comes for you to do so you will feel reluctance and longing for your home. But these are people with nice lives to leave behind. For others it is different. Leaving is a relief.

The emails continued, full of !!! marks as usual, but they were less frequent, and finally, at the internet café near East Tsim Sha Tsui station, waiting for the train to Shenzhen, Phoebe logged on for the first time in four days to find not a single email from her friend. Not even a short message that said, *Hurry, too excited*, followed by lots of smileys. When at last she got to Shenzhen it took her some time to locate the restaurant. The sign was proud and shiny. *New World International Restaurant*, it read above twin pillars of twisted gold dragons – Phoebe recognised it from the photos her friend had sent her. The menu was in a glass case outside, a sure sign of a classy joint. But as she approached, Phoebe's heart began to experience a dark fluttering in her ribcage, the way she imagined bat wings would feel against her cheek. It was a sensation that would stay with her for the rest of her time in China. The glass doors were open, but the restaurant inside was dim even though it was the middle of the afternoon. When she stepped

inside she saw an empty space without any chairs and tables. Part of the floor had been ripped up, and on the bare concrete she could see messy patches of glue where carpets had once been laid. There was a bar decorated with scenes of Chinese legends carved in bronze, cranes flying over mountains and lakes. Some workmen were shifting machinery and tools at the far end of the restaurant, and when Phoebe called out to them they seemed confused. The restaurant had closed down a few days ago, soon it would be a hotpot chain. The people who worked there? Probably just got jobs somewhere else. No one stays in a job for long in Shenzhen anyway.

She thought, This is not a good situation.

She tried calling her friend's mobile phone number, but it was dead. This number is out of use, the voice told her, over and over again. Each time she dialled it was the same. This number is out of use.

She checked how much money she had and began looking for a cheap guesthouse. The streets were clean but full of people. Everyone looked as though they were hurrying to an appointment, everyone had some place to go. Amid the mass of people that swarmed around her like a thick muddy river, she started to notice a certain kind of person, and soon they were the only people she really saw. Young single women. They were everywhere, rushing for the bus or marching steadfastly with a steely look on their faces, or going from shop to shop handing out their CVs, their entire lives on one sheet of paper. They were all restless, they were all moving, they were all looking for work, floating everywhere, casting out their lives to whoever would take them.

So this is how it happens. This is how I become like them, Phoebe thought. In the space of a few hours she had passed from one world to another. One moment she was almost an assistant manager in a classy international restaurant, next moment she was a migrant worker. Her new life had materialised out of thin air like a trick of fate. Unattached, searching, alone. Some people say that when you find other people who are just like you, who share your

position in life, you feel happier, less alone, but Phoebe did not think this was true. Knowing that she was the same as millions of other girls made her feel lonelier than ever.

She went back to her lodgings. The door wouldn't lock, so she slept with her handbag tucked into her belly, curved into a tight C-shape.

Those first few months in Shenzhen passed very quickly. During this time Phoebe did a number of jobs that she would rather not talk about right now. Maybe some day, but not now.

You can only rely on yourself. There are no true friends in this world. If you place your trust in others you will open yourself to danger and hurtfulness.

She got a job at a place called Guangdong Bigfaith Quality Garment Company, a factory that made fashion clothes for Western brands – not the expensive labels that Phoebe had heard of but lesser ones that sold shiny, colourful clothes, though the other girls told her that these were trendy shops even though they were low-cost. Apparently in the West even rich people buy cheap clothes. Personally Phoebe did not want any of the skirts or jackets or blouses that were made at the factory; they looked unclassy even to her. Her job was to match up the orders to the delivery notes and make sure that everything tallied. It was not a difficult job, but still she cried every night. The hours were long and at night she had to endure being in a dorm with the other girls, so many other girls. She hated seeing their underwear strung up on washing lines in every room, even in the corridors, drying in the damp air. Everywhere you went in the dormitory block all you saw was lines of damp underwear, and the whole place smelled of detergent and sweat. All day and night there was arguing and crying. She hated this, especially the night-time sobbing. It was as if everyone thought that when it was dark no one could hear them cry. She had to get away from them, she was not like them. But for now she had no choice.

The other hard thing to deal with was the jealousy, the things that were said about her. (How did she get such a good job straight away? Why was she in admin and not on the production line when she had only just joined the company? I hear she hasn't even been out for long.) Well, Phoebe wanted to explain, first of all it was because she could speak English and Cantonese, the language of all the rich factory-owners down here in the south. And, quite simply, it was because she was better than the rest of them. But she knew to keep silent. She was afraid of the large groups of girls who came from the big provinces, especially the Hunanese girls who smuggled things out of the factory to sell outside and threatened to kill anyone who reported them. They liked to fight. Everyone had their own clan for protection: the Sichuan girls looked after each other, even the Anhui girls were numerous enough to have support. Only Phoebe was alone, but she would rise above them all because she was smarter. A line stuck in her head, advice given to her by the self-made millionaire. *Hide your brightness, remain in the shadows.* So she had to endure the jealousy and the detergent and the sweat and the crying. But for how long?

Do not let lesser people drag you down. You are a star that shines brightly.

She had a picture of a Taiwanese pop star by her bed. It was just a page torn from a magazine, an advertisement for cows' milk, but it was a nicer decoration than the strung-up panties that the other girls had. It was a struggle to keep the Sellotape attached to the glossy painted wall because of the humidity, and the top corner kept falling away. But she persisted in sticking the picture up so she could look at him and dream about a world where there was no sobbing. If she turned her body at an angle there was only him and her in the world. She liked his delicate smile and watery eyes, and found even the silly white milk-moustache on his lip endearing. When she looked at his face she felt hope swell in her chest. His gentleness made her forget about the harshness of life and made

her believe that she could work hard and show the world her true inner beauty. Maybe she could even be his girlfriend one day. Oh, she knew that it was just a fantasy, but he was so dreamy, and reminded her of the boys she had grown up with, whom she would remember forever as teenagers, even though they had now all moved to the cities and were selling fake leather wallets and probably amphetamines on the side. They had been so happy before, and now they were all growing old so quickly, including Phoebe.

But you are so young, little sister. That was what the new manager of her division began saying to her one day. He was a man from Hong Kong, not fat not thin, not ugly not handsome, just a man from Hong Kong. Once a month he would visit the factory and spend four or five days there. Every time he came he would call her into his office and show her the gifts he had brought for her – a bag of the juiciest tangerines, small sugary pineapples from Taiwan, strawberries, some foreign chocolate that tasted bitter and floury – delicacies that people bought when they could afford to travel. The hamper of fruit lay on his desk wrapped in stiff crinkly plastic that made a loud noise when she touched it. She did not know how she was going to carry it all the way back to her dorm, across the huge courtyard and the basketball courts, did not know where she would keep it or how she would explain it to the other girls. The jealousy against her had not really gone away; the tide had just subsided for the time being, but was waiting to well up like a tsunami at any moment. She knew that the gift was wrong, that she had not really done anything to deserve it, but as she looked at the shiny ripe persimmons, she felt special. Someone had noticed her, someone had thought of her enough to buy her nice things. It had been a long time since anyone had done that, so she accepted the gift.

As she carried the basket down the corridor to her dorm, she could feel the other girls' hot stares burning her with their envy. She was sweating, and her heart was heavy with guilt, heavier than the basket she was carrying. But as she walked into the dorm she found herself talking freely, the words flowing easily from her

mouth. *Ei*, everyone, look what I have! A cousin of mine in Hong Kong got married to a very rich man and they had their wedding. I couldn't afford to go so they sent me some tokens of their big celebration. Come, come, let's all share!

Hei, you did not tell us you are from Hong Kong.

Yes, Phoebe said. From just near the border, in the New Territories.

Oooh, the girls said as they reached for the fruit. So I guess it's natural that you speak Cantonese! We thought you just learnt it to curry favour with the boss!

This is how things happen in China, Phoebe thought as she sat watching her new friends sharing the basket of fruit. Things change so fast. From then on all the girls knew who she was, and they were nice to her. They took her clothes and washed them for her when she was on a long shift, and some of them began to talk to her about their private lives – where they were from, their boyfriend problems, their ambitions. One day she was talking to a girl, just someone she shared meal breaks with in the canteen sometimes, not really a friend. The girl's mobile phone rang, and she just looked at the screen without answering. Her face twisted into a pained expression and she handed the phone to Phoebe. It's the boy I was telling you about, the one who bullies me. Phoebe took the phone and did not even say hello. This is your ex-girlfriend's cousin, she said. This mobile phone belongs to me now. Your ex has a new boyfriend and he is rich and educated, not a stupid peasant like you, so just go away or else I will make trouble for you. I know who you are and which lousy place you work at.

Wah, you are amazing, Phoebe! Everyone was laughing and someone even reached out and put her arm around Phoebe's shoulder.

On her first day off that month she went with some other girls to the cinema. They stopped at a fast-food place and had bubble milk tea before buying a box of octopus balls which they ate while strolling through the night market, linking elbows as if they were still in middle school. They turned their noses up at the cheap

clothes, far cheaper than the ones they made in the factory, stall after stall of thin spangled nylon. The music on the speakers was loud, thumping in their ribcages and drowning out their heartbeats. It made them feel so alive. The smell of fried food and charcoal grills felt familiar to Phoebe – she did not feel so very far from home after all. They saw posters advertising the latest concert of the Taiwanese singer she liked, and the ticket prices did not look too expensive.

Hei, we should all save up some money and go! someone said. Phoebe, you love Gary, don't you? Maybe we can share the cost of your ticket, because you are always cooking for us and sharing your food with us. I hear he's going to sing some Cantonese songs too, since it's here in Guangzhou, so you can teach us to sing along! She was happy that they offered, but she knew that these were empty promises and that no one would actually buy her a ticket.

She stopped to buy a shiny black top decorated with beads, but the other girls scolded her. Forty *kuai*! Too expensive. *Aiya*, new girls are always the same, always spending money on useless things instead of sending it home. Besides, you should be buying nicer clothes, something that suits your slim figure better, not some Old Mother style! But Phoebe bought it anyway, she didn't care. It had pretty embroidery, a red rose adorned with silver beads that fanned out from each petal.

But as swiftly as the bright cool days of autumn give way to the damp chill of winter, life also changes. Phoebe knew this by now. Nothing ever stood still in China, nothing was permanent. A person who is loved cannot expect that love to remain for long. There is no reason for them to keep this love; they do not have a right to be loved.

She shared her third basket of fruit and other delicacies with her dorm friends. This time there were bags of dried scallops and a tin of abalone, which none of them had ever tasted before, and they gathered to cook a meal together. It was too luxurious for lowly people like them, one girl remarked – this meal was all thanks to Phoebe.

Really, said another girl, lifting her rice bowl to her mouth. Boss Lin says this kind of thing is not so special in Hong Kong, everyone eats it over there.

How would you know? When do you ever talk to Boss Lin?

Hm, it's true. I rarely get a chance to speak to him. The only person he speaks to is Phoebe.

I wish he didn't, Phoebe joked. He is so boring. *Hai*, it's only because of my stupid job that I have to have contact with him.

It seems he takes a special interest in you. He even calls you into his private office.

Yes, but only to scold me for tasks I haven't done! Come, eat some more!

The next month, Mr Lin summoned Phoebe to see him as soon as he arrived. He shut the door; the blinds were already down as usual. There was no fruit basket this time, only a small box. He opened it and held out a brand-new mobile phone, the type with no buttons on the screen, just a smooth glass surface. It was something a tycoon's daughter would have, or a businesswoman. Phoebe didn't even know how to turn it on.

But I already have a phone.

It's OK, take it. Just tell your friends you won it in a competition.

She held it in her hands, turning it over and over again. She held it up to her face. It was like a mirror – she could see herself in it.

You like it? Mr Lin was standing next to her, though she had not heard him approach her. He put his hand on her buttock, the palm flat, burning through her jeans. Hours later, she would still feel the imprint of his hot hand on her, leaving its mark where it had stayed for less than half a minute, maybe not even that long.

In the dorm someone said, What's happened to your cousin in Hong Kong? No food hamper this month? I think the cousin must have suddenly died and turned into a ghost!

Next day, two Shaanxi girls from the next block were taken away by the police. When Phoebe asked why, one of her dorm

mates said it was because they didn't have the right papers. They were illegal, and one of them was underage.

But I thought you said that kind of thing doesn't really matter, that the employer doesn't ask too many questions, where you're from and all that, Phoebe said.

Sure, that's right, her dorm mate replied, smiling. But rules are rules. You can dodge the regulations for so long, but if someone makes a formal report there's nothing anyone can do. Half the girls here are lying about something, and most of the time it's OK. Even if you don't have a proper *hukou* or your papers are fake, who cares? Only when you step out of line do others make trouble for you. Those girls were unpopular, they were arrogant and made enemies. They thought they were better than everyone else, so what could they expect? It was just a matter of time.

One morning Phoebe came back after a night shift and saw that the poster by her bed had been defaced. The pop singer's moon-bright complexion had been dotted with acne and now he wore round black glasses and there were thick cat whiskers sprouting from his cheeks.

Time was running out for Phoebe. From the first moment she set foot in China she had felt the days vanishing from her life, vanishing into failure. Like the clock she stared at every day at work, her life was counting down the minutes before she became a non-person whom no one would ever remember. As she sat during lunch break on the low brick wall next to the volleyball court, she knew that she had to act now or she would forever be stepped on everywhere she went. The grey concrete dormitory blocks rose up on all four sides of the yard and blocked out the light. There was Cantonese pop music playing from somewhere and through an open window she could see a TV playing reruns of the Olympics, Chinese athletes winning medals. She watched the high jump for a while. A lanky blonde girl failed twice, flopping down heavily on the bar. One more go and she was out. It didn't really matter, since she wasn't even going to win a medal. Then suddenly she did something that made Phoebe shiver with

excitement. For her third and final jump she asked for the bar to be raised higher than anyone had jumped so far, higher than she had ever attained in her whole life. She had failed at lower heights but now she was gunning for something way beyond her capabilities. She was going to jump all the way to the stars, and even if she failed she could only come down as far as the lowly position she already occupied. She stood at the end of the runway flexing her fingers and shaking her wrists, and then she started running, in big bouncy strides. Phoebe got up and turned away. She didn't want to see what happened, it was not important to her. The only thing that mattered was that the blonde girl had gambled.

She took her expensive new phone to a Sichuan girl who traded things in the dorm, and sold it for a nice sum of cash. She washed her hair and tied it neatly before going to Boss Lin's office. She was wearing her tightest jeans that she usually reserved for her day off. They were so tight that she could not sit down comfortably without them cutting into the tops of her thighs.

Little Miss, it's highly irregular for us to hand out salaries before payday, he said, but he was already looking for the number of the accounts department.

Come on, it's almost the end of the month, only a week to go. Phoebe twirled her hair and inclined her head the way she noticed other girls doing when they talked to the handsome security guards. Anyway, she laughed, our relationship is a bit irregular, don't you think?

Foshan, Songxia, Dongguan, Wenzhou – she was going to bypass them all. Her bar was going to be raised all the way to the sky. There was only one city she could go to now, the biggest and brightest of them all.



The girl at the next table was still reading her magazine, her boyfriend sending messages on his iPhone. Sometimes he would read out a message and laugh, but the girl would not respond, she

just continued to flick through her magazine. He looked up at Phoebe, just for a split second, and at first she thought he was scowling in that familiar look-down-on-you expression. But then she realised that he was squinting because of the light. He hadn't even noticed her.

The girl's mobile phone rang and she began to rummage in her handbag for it, emptying out its contents on the table. There were so many shiny pretty things, lipstick cases, keyrings, and also a leather diary, a pen, stray receipts, and scrunched-up pieces of tissue paper. She answered the phone, and as she did so, stood up and gathered her things, hastily replacing them in her bag. Her boyfriend was trying to help her, but she was frowning with impatience. A 5-*mao* coin fell to the floor and rolled to Phoebe's feet. She bent over and picked it up.

'Don't worry,' the boy said over his shoulder as he followed his girlfriend out. 'It's only 5 *mao*.'

They had just left when Phoebe noticed something on the table. Half hidden under a paper napkin was the girl's ID card. Phoebe looked up and saw that they were still on the pavement, waiting for a gap in the traffic to cross the road. She could have rushed out and called to them, done them a huge favour. But she waited, feeling her heart pound and the blood rush to her temples. She reached across and took the card. The photo was bland; you couldn't make out the cheekbones that in real life were so sharp you could have cut your hand on them. In the photo the girl's face was flat and pale. She could have been any other young woman in the café.

Outside, the boy was leading the girl by the hand as they crossed the road. She was still on the phone, her floppy bag trailing behind her like a small dog. The skies were clear that day, a touch of autumn coolness in the air.

With a paper napkin, Phoebe wiped the breadcrumbs off the card and tucked it safely into her purse.

If you've enjoyed reading this extract and want to find out what happens to Phoebe and the other characters of *Five Star Billionaire*, you can purchase the book here:

<http://amzn.to/161UiRp>

